

Occupy Wall Street: a lost Libertarian opportunity

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Coming up to seven years since the Occupy Wall Street protests, perhaps we have reached a good time to look back at the movement in hindsight. Occupy Wall Street started out as a protest against the disproportionate power of the 1% against the 99%. It was a protest against corporate power. Occupiers literally occupied the Wall Street area by setting up camp there. The movement also grew over time, with more and more people joining. There was even a shared kitchen and a medical clinic. While the first Occupy was in Wall Street, similar protests quickly spread throughout America and the rest of the Western world. Hence Occupy became a movement in its own right.

What did the Occupiers want, anyway?

Participants of Occupy hailed from diverse political backgrounds. There were people who were left-liberal, socialist, libertarian and apolitical alike. Which was not surprising: each of these groups had their own grief against corporate power. For left-liberals, it was the inequality in wealth and opportunity. For libertarians, it was corporate welfare, crony capitalism and protectionist measures that distorted the free market, making it hard for new entrants to compete. For socialists, their opposition to corporates was more ideological. Anyway, people generally focused on their common message, rather than their political differences.

A Lost Libertarian Opportunity

Several observers thought that Occupy presented an opportunity for Libertarian co-operation. Libertarianism, first coined in 2006, refers to co-operation or even some ideological fusion between libertarians and left-liberals (or simply Liberals, in common American usage). Libertarianism thus proposes a way to somewhat heal the great liberal divide of the early 20th century. Libertarianism was first proposed as an alliance against Bush-era neo-conservative foreign policy (e.g. the 2003 Iraq War) and social conservatism (e.g. the Bush administration's attempts to stamp out gay marriage). By the Obama era, there initially seemed to be less of a case for this sort of alliance. However, the shared frustration with the uneven playing field in contemporary capitalism emerged as a new common cause during Occupy.

Libertarians and left-liberals were not going to agree on everything. The former's insistence on shirking government and the latter's insistence on growing the welfare state weren't going to change, for example. But there was indeed plenty of scope for co-operation towards ending crony capitalism and making the free market work for all individuals again. Alas, this did not happen. Why? Both libertarians and left-liberals were out-organised by another force, one which wanted to end free market capitalism altogether.

The Neo-Marxist Influence in Occupy

Libertarians and left-liberals may differ quite substantially on what they perceive as a working free market economy, but both believe in some sort of free market economy. On the other hand, neo-Marxism had no time for any sort of free market capitalism. Neo-Marxism, an ideology that originated in the non-Communist West in the late 20th century, was a fusion of Marxism with other radical ideologies like critical theory, radical feminism, and privilege theory, while also drawing heavily on post-modern analyses of power. One thing it did share with classical Marxism was its hatred for all capitalism. Hence the neo-Marxists were generally unwelcoming of libertarian presence at Occupy movements. Many even openly said that libertarians did not belong in the movement. This was possibly the beginning of the strong hostility displayed towards libertarianism in many left-wing circles we see today.

But unlike classical Marxism, neo-Marxism is not only about economics. Plenty of neo-Marxists are actually strongly focused on cultural issues (the 'superstructure' in Marxist theory), opposing capitalism partly because they believe that cultural structures can only change when we abandon the capitalist economic system (the 'infrastructure' in Marxist theory). Hence, where there was neo-Marxism, there was cultural conflict. For example, the imposition of progressive stack speaking systems in many Occupy protests towards the later stages of the movement drove many people away. (Progressive stack operates by prioritising speaking order based on how 'oppressed' the speaker is.) After all, nobody wants to be told that they need to 'check their privilege' and forfeit their right to speak.

Revisiting Occupy, for the sake of Liberty

In the end, liberals of all stripes (left-liberals, Democrats, libertarians alike) did not do too well out of the Occupy movement, even if they may have been there right from the start. Not only was the libertarian proposal for co-operation abandoned, liberals were also unable to argue for a renewed commitment to truly fair and free market economics for all. Instead, Occupy became a springboard for collectivists of all stripes, including neo-Marxists, to practice their ideology and recruit more people into their ranks. For the far-left, Occupy was the place where a mass movement was showcased, and alternatives to liberal democratic norms like the progressive stack were popularized.

But as liberals, I believe we should revisit exactly what happened in Occupy. Why were liberals out-organized? Why did the libertarian proposal for co-operation fail? Why did liberal ideas lose out to collectivist ideas in the competition for hearts and minds? I believe it was because the core values and ideals of liberalism had become faded and almost forgotten over time. Locke and Mill, Rawls and Nozick, Keynes and Hayek, they were almost polar opposites in many policy positions, but they were all passionately committed to liberty. And that passion is what we need to reclaim.

I believe that a morally driven liberalism will be key to rekindling liberal passion in the 21st century. For example, under the Moral Libertarian doctrine of Equal Moral Agency (EMA), we have strong justification for resisting collectivist inventions like the progressive stack. We also find strong justification for the superiority of free market based logic, as in the free market of ideas. It really is a complete toolkit for fighting back against the rise of illiberal 'alternatives'.